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Inside Arafat's Bunker

By Matt Rees/Ramallah

TIME

For an hour each afternoon, Yasser Arafat, wearing his checkered kaffiyeh and olive fatigues, paces back and forth the 15 yards from one end of his spartan office to the other. It's a longtime regular form of exercise for the Palestinian leader, but its symbolism has never been more painful to him. If Arafat were to leave his office and walk just four times its length, he would bump into the sharp end of an Israeli Merkava tank. It's a big change from the globe-trotting statesmanship that was Arafat's forte until Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon moved his armor to the next block, essentially effecting a house arrest. Though Arafat publicly plays his quondary as a heroic siege, privately he told a visitor last week he feels abandoned by his old backers on the Israeli left and in Washington. "I don't know what I did wrong," Arafat said. "They are sharpening the knives and giving them to Sharon to slaughter me."

In fact, it's no mystery how Arafat alienated old allies. There's that ship, for instance, that the Israelis caught four weeks ago trying to smuggle 50 tons of munitions into the Gaza Strip, a cargo the State Department is now satisfied that Arafat, despite his denials, knew about. Before that, in the summer of 2000, there was Arafat's walking away from the best peace offer Israel has ever made, and then his follow-up move of unleashing a violent new Palestinian uprising. So annoyed is Washington with

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Arafat that the White House last week essentially endorsed Israel's confinement of him and then leaked that it is considering means of punishing him that include cutting off all ties.

Nothing would delight Israel more. Sharon's strategy is to slowly heap humiliation upon the 72-year-old Arafat to make him seem simply extraneous to his people; the Israeli cabinet already issued a communique that Arafat was "irrelevant" but that it would continue to do business with his Palestinian Authority. Arafat sees the plan being executed every day. Each morning he receives a folder containing an Arabic digest of the Israeli newspapers; in the past week they have been replete with unnamed Israeli military and government sources claiming that Israel wants to see him gone. Two Israeli tanks, an armored personnel carrier and a handful of jeeps outside the shabby Palestinian military compound called the Muqata'a in Ramallah, where Arafat has his West Bank office (his main HQ is in the Gaza Strip), aren't intended as a physical threat. But with each day they stay there, they mock Arafat's nominal authority.

Arafat is trying to fight off the perception of diminishing power by keeping to his old routines--minus the globe-trotting. On the second floor of his sandstone office building, Arafat rises each day and rides for an hour on a stationary bicycle in his bedroom before having a light breakfast at 9 a.m. He's at his desk from 9:30 a.m. until 2 p.m., when he breaks for lunch and takes a nap. In the late afternoon, he paces his office and settles in to read documents and take meetings until 1 a.m. He doesn't bother wearing his trademark Smith & Wesson .357 in his holster or carrying the submachine gun he dramatically toted early in the Aqsa intifadeh. But even this daily regimen is not completely within Arafat's control. Last Sunday he had to stay up all night reading faxed field reports after Israeli troops took over the West Bank town of Tulkarem. In the 15-minute gaps between faxes, Arafat called regional leaders and pleaded for help. But the diplomatic protests were muted, and the Israelis stayed another day before pulling out.

There would be more diplomacy on Arafat's behalf if international leaders saw him reining in his gunmen. But that has not happened. Instead, Arafat's siege has become the rallying cry for members of his organization to spill the blood of Israeli civilians. On Monday night the Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, a militia from Arafat's Fatah faction, warned in a statement that "if Israel doesn't lift the siege on Arafat within 24 hours, we will perpetrate another suicide attack within a day." The militants

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were true to their word. In a meeting room in the main police station in downtown Jerusalem, officers heard shots nearby. As they ran toward the sound, the beepers on their belts all went off at once: "A terrorist is shooting in the Jaffa Street, King George area." By the time they arrived, an off-duty cop had shot the gunman, Fatah activist Said Ramadan, 24. The officers saw Ramadan lying on his back. He raised his head and tried to sit up. Thinking he might try to detonate a bomb, the police opened fire. Ramadan's face was shot away by the volley. Before he died, he had killed two Israelis and wounded 40.

That militants within Fatah, a secular organization, are imitating the suicide operations of radical Islamic groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad disturbs Israeli security officials, since terrorists bent on dying are so hard to stop. Ramadan was the first Fatah gunman to leave a videotaped "martyrdom" message, a move right out of the Hamas playbook. Because Arafat isn't even trying to restrain the Islamic militants and because his own Fatah is joining in the violence, Israel is experiencing an unprecedented number of terrorist alerts. The Shin Bet security service has an emergency situation room that goes into operation when there's concrete evidence a terror attack is about to take place. It is usually called into use no more than once a day. Shin Bet sources tell TIME they are operating the situation room on average four times a day now.

Aides to Arafat say that is also about how often each day he compares the current siege of his Ramallah office with Israel's 1982 blockade of his bunker in Beirut. "We are under siege, like in Beirut," Arafat told aides Wednesday morning. Back then Arafat escaped Sharon, who was Israel's Defense Minister. Benefiting from a U.S.-brokered deal, Arafat sailed out of Beirut, heroic in defeat and vowing to fight on to Palestine. But there's no refuge this time. His aides know it, though none will tell him, and the atmosphere in the Muqata'a is despondent. Arafat struck a gallant and sacrificial pose at a meeting in his office with Palestinian professors last week. "All I ask God is to grant me martyrdom in Jerusalem," Arafat said. "This is not the first time we have been besieged by Israeli tanks." But the rhetoric wears thin in private; aides say Arafat has been quiet and a little sullen.

Outside the Muqata'a, Fatah activists set up a protest marquee under the guns of the Israeli tanks last week. About 100 marched from the center of Ramallah along al-Irsal Street toward Arafat's office. Traffic stopped as they moved down the road to confront with stones and slingshots the Israeli soldiers who would fire back with rubber bullets. But after they had

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passed, the busy street filled with its usual quarrelsome car horns and smells of frying falafel. It was far from the communal desperation of the intifadeh's early days. Palestinians have their own sieges to worry about, as they wait on massive lines to pass Israeli checkpoints. If Sharon wants to make Arafat seem irrelevant, he may be succeeding on al-Irsal Street.



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